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by MIKE WHITNEY

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Turkish Invasion Pits Neocons Against Traditional Imperialists



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US foreign policy in the Middle East is not merely adrift, it is in a state of severe crisis. Even as Turkish tanks and warplanes continue to pound US allies in northwestern Syria (The Kurds), powerbrokers in the White House and the Pentagon are unable to settle on a way forward. The frantic attempts to placate their NATO ally, Turkey, while trying to assuage the fears of their mostly Kurdish proxy-army (Syrian Democratic Forces) has further underscored the dismal absence of a coherent policy that would not only address the rapidly-changing battlespace but also deal with the prospect that a critical regional

ally (Turkey) might seek strategic objectives that are directly at odds with those of Washington. The present disaster that is unfolding in the Afrin canton in Syria's northwest corner could have been avoided had the Trump administration abstained from announcing that it planned a permanent military presence in east Syria, which implied its tacit support for an independent Kurdish state. This, in fact, was the trigger for the current crisis, the provocation that set the dominoes in motion.

The unexpected escalation of fighting on the ground (Afrin), along with Turkey's promise to clear the Syrian border all the way to the Iraq, has only increased the sense of panic among Trump's top national security advisors who are making every effort to minimize the damage by trying to bring Turkey's invasion to a swift end. As yet, there is no sign that Turkey will stop its onslaught short of achieving its goals which involve defeating elements of the People's Protection Units (YPG) that have joined the US-backed SDF. Ankara has already warned Washington that it will defend its national security against Kurdish forces (which it considers "terrorists") whether US troops are located in the area or not. The possibility that one NATO ally might actually attack US Special Forces operating on the ground in Syria has ignited a flurry of diplomatic activity in Washington and across Europe. What started as an announcement that was intended to send a warning to Moscow and Tehran that the US planned to be in Syria "for the long-haul", has dramatically backfired pitting Ankara against Washington while casting doubt on the Trump administration's ability to diffuse a potentially-explosive situation. Here's a clip from veteran journalist Patrick Cockburn's latest in The Independent:

The US may want to get rid of Assad and weaken Iran across the region but it is too late. Pro-Iranian governments in Iraq and Syria are in power and Hezbollah is the most powerful single force in Lebanon. This is not going to change any time soon and, if the Americans want to weaken Assad by keeping a low-level war going, then this will make him even more reliant on Iran.

The present Turkish incursion shows that Ankara is not going to allow a new Kurdish state under US protection to be created in northern Syria and will fight rather than let this happen. But the YPG is highly motivated, well-armed and militarily experienced and will fight very hard, even though they may ultimately be overwhelmed by superior forces or because the Turkish and Syrian governments come together to crush them.

It was a bad moment for the US to stir the pot by saying it would stay in Syria and target Assad and Iran. A Kurdish-Turkish war in northern Syria will be a very fierce one. The US obsession with an exaggerated Iranian threat – about which, in any case, it cannot do

much – makes it difficult for Washington to mediate and cool down the situation. Trump and his chaotic administration have not yet had to deal with a real Middle East crisis yet and the events of the last week suggest that they will not be able to do so.” (“Patrick Cockburn, The Independent)

The Trump administration has made a hash of everything and it is no longer certain that their present Syria strategy is viable. Trump’s national security advisor General HR McMaster has made every effort to smooth things over with Ankara, but his promises of accommodation do not approach Turkey’s grandiose demands. Consider the list of Turkish demands listed in the Turkish Daily, The Hurriyet:

1. No weapons should be given to the YPG.
2. Weapons already delivered to the YPG should be taken back immediately.
3. Military training given to the YPG should be ceased.
4. No logistical support should be given.
5. All ties with the YPG should be cut.

The Trump administration is not prepared to sever ties with its most effective fighters on the ground. Washington intends to use these troops to hold territory in the east, launch destabilizing attacks on the Assad government, and to undermine Iran’s influence in Syria. As one anonymous US official candidly admitted, “The entire US strategy rests on the Kurds.” So, while McMaster has already promised to stop all weapons shipments to the SDF, he will undoubtedly reverse his position when the fighting subsides and the crisis passes.

Washington’s biggest problem is the absence of a coherent policy. While the recently released National Defense Strategy articulated a change in the way the imperial strategy would be implemented, (by jettisoning the “war on terror” pretext to a “great power” confrontation) the changes amount to nothing more than a tweaking of the public relations ‘messaging’. Washington’s global ambitions remain the same albeit with more emphasis on raw military power. As for Syria, Washington still hasn’t settled on a way to square the circle, that is, a way to support its Kurdish forces on the ground without provoking its Turkish allies who see the Kurds as an existential threat. This conundrum might have continued to be ignored for some time, had not Secretary of State Rex Tillerson let the cat out of the bag and revealed Washington’s real intentions. Which is why McMaster has been doing every thing he can to put the genie back in the bottle.

But even these problems are just the tip of the iceberg. The real problem is the fact that there deep and irreconcilable differences between foreign policy elites as to what the policy should be. Check out this excerpt from the New York Times:

The White House sent out a message aimed at mollifying Turkey's president on Tuesday, suggesting that the United States was easing off its support for the Syrian Kurds. That message was quickly contradicted by the Pentagon, which said it would continue to stand by the Kurds, even as Turkey invaded their stronghold in northwestern Syria.

The conflicting statements appeared to reflect an effort by the administration to balance competing pressures... the White House disavowed a plan by the American military to create a Kurdish-led force in northeastern Syria, which Turkey has vehemently opposed.... ...the Pentagon issued its own statement on Tuesday standing by its decision to create the Kurdish-led force. And a senior American commander praised the partnership with the Kurds, whose help was critical in a major American airstrike on the Islamic State, also known as ISIS, over the weekend. ("Mixed Messages From U.S. as Turkey Attacks Syrian Kurds", New York Times)

The apparent split between the Pentagon and the White House does not reflect the deeper divisions which will become more apparent as the traditional imperialists in the administration face-off with the neocons in a cage-match that will determine the shape of policy in Syria and beyond. Simply put, the neocons favor an independent Kurdish state (that is opposed by Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey) while the traditionalists lean more towards accommodating their NATO ally, Turkey. Here's a short excerpt from an article at the neocon braintrust, The Weekly Standard, that makes the case for a Kurdish homeland. The article, which was written in 2017, is titled "A Kurdish State is in America's Interest—and the Region's, Too":

"America's main Middle East ally, however, is unequivocally in favor of an independent Kurdistan. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said earlier this month that Israel supports "the legitimate means of the Kurdish people to obtain their own state."...

Israel, like many supporters of the Kurds, appreciates the KRG's pro-Western sensibility. And the KRG returns Israel's affection, flying Israeli flags at independence rallies. ... As Israeli lawmaker Yair Lapid tweeted: "The Jewish people know what it is to struggle for a homeland. The Kurds have a moral right to a state of their own. I wish them luck today."

There's little doubt that Israeli officials truly are moved by the KRG's dreams of statehood, but no one in the Middle East can afford to premise national interests on sentimental reasons. Israel sees the KRG as an ally, especially in its struggle with Iran.

Jerusalem believes that an independent Kurdish state on Iran's border will serve as a bridgehead against what it perceives as the region's main strategic threat.

And that puts Israel at cross-purposes with the United States. The Trump administration believes that destroying ISIS is the key issue in the region, which is why it criticizes the referendum. However, the effect of the anti-ISIS campaign is to strengthen further Iran's position—at the expense not only of Israel, but all American allies, and the United States itself. Thus, the KRG referendum highlights the strategic picture in the Middle East right now. It doesn't look good for American interests." ("A Kurdish State is in America's Interest—and the Region's, Too", The Weekly Standard)

While the above excerpt relates to the efforts of Iraq's Kurds to create their own autonomous homeland via referendum, as far as Israel is concerned, the same rule applies to Syria's Kurds, that is, an independent Kurdish state that is not only pro-Western, but directly beholden to Washington, will help to contain, what Israel perceives to be, the region's main strategic threat, Iran. A Kurdish Republic would also help to balkanize Syria, control the flow of oil in the eastern part of the country, and be a constant threat to the other strong, secular Arab countries in the region. It would effectively create a powerful US-Israeli garrison at the heart of the Middle East which would further reinforce Israel's claim to regional hegemony. For these reasons we should expect to see a tug-of-war between competing US policy elites in the weeks ahead.

Regrettably, neither the Israeli-friendly neocons nor the traditional US imperialists seek a remedy that would end the seven year-long war or allow 5 million Syrian refugees to return to their battered homes.